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ISSN: 1412-3320

A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching & Literature

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“AMERICA, YOU KNOW WHAT I’M TALKIN’ ABOUT!”: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN BEULAH AND BERNIE MAC

Angela Nelson¹

***Abstract:** This paper compares and contrasts The Beulah Show (ABC, 1950-1953) and The Bernie Mac Show (Fox, 2001-2006) in order to trace the differences and similarities between the racialized, gendered, and classed representations of blacks in American television situation comedy genre over a fifty-year period. The paper critically examines and interprets the image constructions of each series’ central character, Beulah Brown and Bernie Mac, within the contexts of race, gender, and class, specifically utilizing Herman Gray’s theory of the discursive practices of segregationism, pluralism, and multiculturalism. The paper demonstrates that these image constructions are representative of race and black (objectivity and) subjectivity in U.S. society. The analysis of Beulah Brown is based on screenings of the episode “Donnie’s Dance Date” which featured Hattie McDaniel, Ruby Dandridge, Ernest Whitman, David Bruce, Jane Frazee, and Stuffy Singer in 1951 and the analysis of Bernie Mac is based on screenings*

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of "Bernie Mac, Ladies Man," the fourth episode of the series in 2001.

Key words: black sitcom; *The Bernie Mac Show*; *The Beulah Show*.

"AMERICA, YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT!": RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN *BEULAH* AND *BERNIE MAC*

Historically, black situation comedy, or black sitcoms, has demonstrated how interactions of race, gender, and class are constructed and narrated in relation to African Americans on television because black gendered and classed representations appear frequently in the situation comedy genre (MacDonald 1992:181, Gray 1995:74). In this paper, I will compare and contrast *The Beulah Show* (ABC, 1950-1953) and *The Bernie Mac Show* (Fox, 2001-2006) in order to trace the differences and similarities of racialized, gendered, and classed representations of blacks in American television situation comedy genre over a fifty-year period. *The Beulah Show* was off the air in 1953 and, fifty years later, *Bernie Mac* was one of a handful of black sitcoms that preeminently featured African American male characters in 2003.

This paper will critically examine and interpret the image constructions of each series' central character, Beulah Brown and Bernie Mac, within the contexts of race, gender, and class, specifically utilizing Herman Gray's theory of the discursive practices of segregationism, pluralism, and multiculturalism (Gray 1995:84). As will be demonstrated, these image constructions are representative of race and Black (objectivity and) subjectivity in U.S. society (Gray 1995:75-76). My analysis of Beulah Brown was based on screenings of the episode "Donnie's Dance Date" which featured Hattie McDaniel, Ruby Dandridge, Ernest Whitman,

David Bruce, Jane Frazee, and Stuffy Singer in 1951². My analysis of Bernie Mac was based on screenings of "Bernie Mac, Ladies Man," the fourth episode of the series in 2001.

IMAGE CONSTRUCTIONS OF "BEULAH" IN *THE BEULAH SHOW*

In *The Beulah Show*, Beulah Brown, a black, live-in maid (played by Ethel Waters, 1950-51; Hattie McDaniel, 1951-52; and Louise Beavers, 1952-53), was a pivotal figure in the Henderson household, a suburban white middle class family. The Henderson family included father and businessman Harry (William Post, Jr., 1950-52; David Bruce, 1952-53), mother and homemaker Alice (Ginger Jones, 1950-52; Jane Frazee, 1952-53), and their 10-year old son Donnie (Clifford Sales, 1950-52; Stuffy Singer, 1952-53). Beulah could manage and solve all of their problems except her own which was convincing her boyfriend and fix-it shop owner Bill Jackson (Percy "Bud" Harris, 1950-51; Arthur "Dooley" Wilson, 1951-52; Ernest Whitman, 1952-53) to marry her. Bill along with Beulah's girlfriend Oriole Winston (Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen, 1950-51; Ruby Dandridge, 1951-53), a fellow maid of the Henderson's next-door neighbors, was always present to assist Beulah in resolving her weekly situations (Brooks and Marsh 1995:96, Terrace 1976:47).

In October 1950, *The Beulah Show* was the first major American television situation comedy series to star a black

² According to Hattie McDaniel's biographer Carlton Jackson, McDaniel filmed six episodes of the TV *Beulah* in the summer of 1951 before becoming very ill in August (140). Jackson also notes that McDaniel's episodes were not aired at that time. Even so, "Donnie's Dance Date" was chosen for analysis because McDaniel's "Beulah" was the most perfected, due in part to her playing the radio role for four solid years.

performer. *The Beulah Show*, and two other series *The Laytons* (DuMont 1948)³ and *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* (CBS, 1951-53)⁴ operated within the discursive practice of Segregationism (or “Separate-but-Unequal”). Segregationist, or separate-but-unequal, discourses presented blacks in stereotypical and subservient roles thereby making them socially, culturally, and politically “separate and unequal” to whites. Black sitcoms appearing on television from 1948 to 1953 illustrated explicit social and cultural rules of race relations between blacks and whites. Specifically, black otherness (or black objectivity) was required for white subjectivity; blacks and whites occupied separate and unequal worlds; black labor was always in the service of white domesticity; and black humor was necessary for the amusement of whites (Gray 1995:75).

Historically, Beulah’s role is closely patterned after the Mammy, the primary image construction of black females in American popular culture prior to the TV *Beulah*. Mammies were faithful, obedient domestics who could also be domineering, strong-willed, and bossy (Dates 263). They were a “blend of quick temper, earthy wisdom” (MacDonald 1992:341) and typified the “good” black mother figure in white homes (Collins 1991:73). Beulah is a Mammy (Bogle 2001:22). She is faithful, obedient, and respectful to the Henderson family, and is a “good” black mother figure in the Henderson home. For example, at the beginning of the episode, “Donnie’s Dance Date,” Beulah’s subservient role as a

³ Amanda Randolph was the first black person to star in a television network sitcom series, *The Laytons*, which aired from August to October in 1948 on the DuMont Network (1945-55). Vera Tatum co-starred in the series but little is known about the actress or the series in general (Brooks and Marsh 585; Hill, Raglin, and Johnson 5).

⁴ The significance of *Amos 'n' Andy* to the evolution of American situation comedy genre in general and the codification of television representations of blacks in particular are examined at great length in studies by Michele Hilmes (1997), Melvin Ely (1991), and Arthur Wertheim (1979).

domestic is clearly illustrated. She is shown wearing a standard housekeeping uniform serving a cooked breakfast to Harry and Alice even laying the cloth napkin on Harry's lap. Beulah's faithfulness and obedience to the family is demonstrated in her willingness to nurture Donnie. At breakfast, Alice tells Harry that she is concerned about Donnie's social life because his dance school teacher Madame Matilda from the "Academy" says he is the "clumsiest dancer in the class" and is the "most awkward with the girls." Beulah overhears their conversation and offers to teach reluctant Donnie how to dance for the upcoming social event. Beulah, with Bill's assistance, teaches Donnie how to "boogie-woogie," which assures that he will be successful at the dance. Overall, Beulah is compassionate, competent, content, proud of her work, and devoted to the Hendersons (Bogle 2001:22).

However, in interactions with her own "family" consisting of Bill and Oriole, Beulah can be both bossy and quick-tempered. For example, she berates Bill for wanting to eat lunch when the more important duty at the moment was for her to teach Donnie how to dance. Finally, Beulah's construction as a Mammy is supported by the fact that she is intelligent, conscientious, and full of earthy wisdom. For example, her earthy wisdom is demonstrated by the pithy comment she makes at the opening of the episode: "Don't let nobody tell you that I'm in the market for a husband. 'Course, I would be, but they don't sell husbands in a market" ("Donnie's Dance"; Watkins 1994:305).

Even though Beulah is on one level a typical black, live-in domestic, her portrayal does not succumb totally to the simplistic functions often ascribed to the Mammy stereotype because of the intricacies of character development in TV sitcoms. The central character of *any* TV show has a large amount of "narrative power" simply because the episodes are written from their point of view, are based on their values, and literally revolve around them. Many

sitcoms from the 1950s and early 1960s centered on the domestic authority of the white father. However, because Beulah is the central character of the series, she is given the same relative amount of narrative power. For example, Beulah's narrative importance is rendered (1) in the flow and content of familial conversations, (2) in her position at the center of the narrative, and in her (3) visual and aural dominance within the rooms of the house (Leibman 1995:118, 129). Therefore, Beulah is afforded this narrative importance, *not* because she is black, female, and working class but because she is the *star* of the show.

In conclusion, Beulah Brown was a victim of the time in which her character appeared on television. Even though her race and class indicated on one level that she was separate-and-unequal from the Henderson family, on another level, she was constructed simply as another typical sitcom star that enjoyed the same rights and privileges as white fathers in other sitcoms. *The Beulah Show* should be remembered as one of the pioneers of the American television situation comedy genre because it helped to shape the sitcom form, it was one of the first TV sitcoms filmed on the West Coast (Castleman and Podrazik 1982:59), and it was the first significant TV sitcom to focus on blacks. Unfortunately, however, it also pioneered and televisually began constructing an image of black women that has been very difficult to dismantle.

IMAGE CONSTRUCTIONS OF “BERNIE” IN *THE BERNIE MAC SHOW*

Appearing fifty years later, Bernard “Bernie Mac” Jeffery McCullough plays a semi-version of himself in *The Bernie Mac Show*. He is a successful, stand-up comedian married to Wanda (Kellita Smith), a successful corporate executive. Bernie and Wanda take custody of his drug-addicted sister's three children: 13-

year-old Vanessa Tompkins (Camille Winbush) who hates just about everything and begrudges her mom's absence; middle child Jordan Tompkins (Jeremy Suarez), 8, who is a nerdy asthmatic; and 5-year-old Bryana Tompkins (Dee Dee Davis) who always asks "Why?" (Speier). To cope with his new family life, Bernie is often seen celebrating at times but mostly commiserating with his card-playing buddies W.B. (Reginald Ballard), Chuy (Lombardo Boyar), and Kelly (Michael Ralph).

The Bernie Mac Show debuted November 14, 2001, on the Fox Network. It introduced as well as shared several characteristics of Fox Network comedies *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006) and *Titus* (2000-2002). These innovative approaches included no laugh track, slightly offbeat characters (Speier), a single high-definition digital camera that follows the characters around, on-screen *Pop-Up Video*-style comments, and confessionals to the camera (Hochman 2002:16). Unlike *The Beulah Show*, *The Bernie Mac Show* operates within the discursive practice of Pluralism (or "Separate but Equal") and Multiculturalism (or "Diversity"). The discourse of multiculturalism/diversity "offers a view of what it means to be American from the vantage point of African Americans" and many black sitcoms appearing after 1984 are engaged in a "cultural politics of difference within blackness" (Gray 1995:90). However, *Bernie Mac* participates in the multiculturalist discourse because of its innovative approaches to the television form in general, not particularly for its engagement of difference within televisual blackness (Gray 1995:90). *Bernie Mac* also operates within the Pluralist discourse where blacks and whites are just alike except for minor differences of habit and racial perspective and where blacks in this television world face the same experiences, situations, and conflicts as whites except that they are separate from whites (Gray 1995:87).

Bernie Mac is constructed as successful, materialistically affluent, and individualistic like his eighties counterparts Benson Dubois in *Benson* (ABC, 1979-86) and George Jefferson in *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-85) and Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992). Just as with these earlier characters, themes of success and affluence define Bernie's representation as a new black male in television (Gray 1986:228-30). His living environment and lifestyle explicitly convey upper middle-class status. Surpassing George and Cliff in material success, Bernie lives in a semi-mansion with wide hallways, spacious rooms, plush furniture, and abundant art objects and plants. Furthermore, he drives a luxury SUV. Bernie is not a white collar professional as George, Benson, and Cliff; he is nevertheless a successful standup comedian living in Los Angeles. Whereas Benson and George were often seen in business suits and Cliff in his medical coat and signature designer sweaters, Bernie wears loose-fitting silk shirts, wool blend slacks, and jewelry.

Bernie's blackness and maleness is an important facet of the show but it is constructed mimetically. That is, Bernie is "one of us," the viewers of the show: equally intelligent and equally able to control circumstances (Chesebro 1987:21). Like his 70s and 80s counterparts George, and Cliff, Bernie does not ignore or disregard African American culture and its sensibilities. For example, when Bernie and his friends are deciding who should help Vanessa create a costume for a seventies dance, Bernie says he should because he was the one who put the "P" in P-funk and he told "Earth and Wind" to get "Fire." Both of these cultural references are to black popular bands of the seventies, Parliament and Earth, Wind & Fire. However, his blackness is not THE ISSUE. Although Bernie is a black man, he is also a typical TV character representing certain circumstances and values, norms, and beliefs seen repeatedly in

American dramatic television over the last fifty years (Chesebro 1987:29).

For all intents and purposes, Bernie has successfully assimilated into American society and his experiences are just like anyone else's. His maleness and blackness is naturalized to the point of being cast as a normal part of everyday life and therefore, so too are his situations, dilemmas, and experiences. For example, in this episode, "Bernie Mac, Ladies Man," Bernie questions his masculinity after spending the afternoon with three female spouses of Wanda's male co-workers. This is further exaggerated when at the company picnic Wanda's boss comments on the fact that Bernie is a "stay-at-home dad" and minimizes Bernie's standup comedy career. Bernie politely objects to this evaluation of his life but cannot seem to get through to Wanda's boss and excuses himself to select food from the picnic table. The dilemma is resolved when Bernie visits Mama Kim's nail salon. She and Papa Kim tell him: "You're a strong black man Bernie Mac. Just be yourself." Indeed he does.

Thankfully, *Bernie Mac* is NOT *Beulah*. The representations of blacks in television comedy today have changed significantly for the better. However, *Bernie Mac* has contributed to this change by its innovative approaches to the television form and its restyling of the black family. However, the quality and success of *Bernie Mac* was in question when Fox dismissed the show's African-American creator and executive producer Larry Wilmore during the middle of the 2003 season (Rice 2003:14). *Bernie Mac* is able to retain its status as an unconventional sitcom even as black sitcoms with prominent African American male characters such as *House of Payne* (TBS, 2006-present), *Meet the Browns* (TBS 2009-2011), *Cleveland Show* (Fox 2009-present), *Are We There Yet?* (TBS 2010-present), *Let's Stay Together* (BET 2011-present), *Reed Between the Lines* (BET 2011-present), and *For Better or Worse*

(TBS 2011-present) entered the primetime TV lineup in 2006 and after, when Bernie Mac was cancelled and ended its first-run episodes. Bernie Mac is a member of the 21st century generation of new black male images in prime-time television and the future analysis of black men in television must be measured in relationship to this series and the impact of its star.

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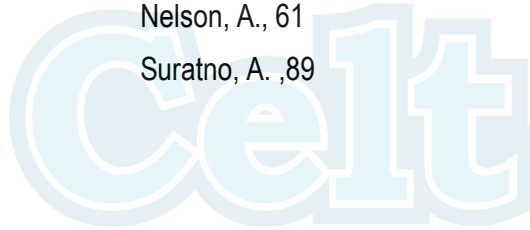
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